DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 536 TM 850 011

AUTHOR Butler, E. Dean
TITLE Ethnographic/Qualitative Research: Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Strategies.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (13th, New Orleans, LA, November 14-16, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; Data Collection; *Educational Research; Ethnography; Reliability; Research Design; *Research Methodology; Theories; Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Naturalistic Research; *Qualitative Research

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the metatheoretical concepts associated with ethnographic/qualitative educational inquiry and overviews the more commonly utilized research designs, data collection methods, and analytical approaches. The epistemological and ontological assumptions of this newer approach differ greatly from those of the traditional educational research orientation. Concepts discussed include multiple realities, discovery and explaining, expansion, importance of situational/contextual elements, and emergent rather than preordained research designs. The following methodological features are defined: case study designs, participant-observer, sampling, analytical induction ethnography, grounded theory, negative case analysis, constant comparative method, researcher as the main data collection instrument, triangulation, maps/models, foreshadowed problems, and levels of abstraction. The four constructs to determine the trustworthiness of naturalistic/qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. (BS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED255536

Ethnographic/Qualitative Research:

Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Strategies

E. Dean Butler

Memphis State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. D. Butler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper prepared for presentation in a symposium on Ethnographic/Qualitative Research, Mid-South Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, November, 1984.

TM 850 011

Ethnographic/Qualitative Research:

Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Strategies

Numerous indicators attest to a major change occurring in educational research. The change is associated with an interest in grounding inquiry on epistemological and ontological assumptions which differ considerably from those historically associated with educational research. These newer beliefs and associated methodologies, referred to as qualitative, field-based, naturalistic, interpretative, ecological and ethnographic, stem from philosophical positions that differ greatly from those of the dominating or controlling orientations. While there is continuing debate over the philosophical grounding of the methods, there is considerable agreement that they stem primarily from phenomenological theory, symbolic interactionism, idealism, and pragmatic thought, not positivistic philosophy, logical empiricism, realism, and hypothetico-deductive orientations to theory construction.

While some claim that we are experiencing a major shift in research paradigms, (Tuthill & Ashton, 1983), for our purpose, we will treat these newer conceptualizations as being associated with a metatheoretical orientation at odds with the metatheory of established educational research. Metatheory will be used here as "an overarching, umbrella theory that encompasses more specific subtheories" (Thomas, 1984, p. 17).

We will briefly treat some major ideas of the metatheory and overview some methodological aspects used in inquiry grounded in such an orientation. The basic purpose is to provide some mapping of the territory we are exploring in the symposium and provide a conceptual

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

framework on which the other presentations can build more elaborate constructions. Or, as stated by Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 20), "to know what you're doing, you need to know how your model of knowing affects what you are doing."

Metatheoretical Conceptualizations of the Qualitative/Naturalistic View

Herbert Simon has demonstrated that we deal with boundless problems with a very bounded rationality. Our nature necessitates that we develop means of determining what to look for and what to ignore as we seek to inquire into the complexities of the world. Our limited information-processing and storage capacities, energy, and attention require that we rely upon conceptual schemes through which we create simplified worlds of manageable size so that we can decide how and what to do. These simplified worlds are theory, which "always mediates between the individual and the world" (Phillips 1983, p. 10).

Moreover, any research strategy is associated with theory since each presupposes an epistemology, which in turn is tied to conceptions of reality (Eisner, 1983; Smith, 1980). While much of the current focus on qualitative and quantitative approaches is concerned with methodological strategies, attention is always being given to epistemological and ontological issues (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Guba, 1978; Patton, 1980; Richardt & Cook, 1979; Smith, 1980).

Our perspective here is congruent with that espoused by those often labeled as "relativistic," holding that one

> recognizes that different theoretical systems regard different phenomena as data, that what constitutes evidence is determined by the theoretical system within which one operates, and that conclusions about reality cannot be dissected from the theoretical and methodological procedures used to generate those conclusions (Eisner, 1983, p.14).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The following metalevel conceptualizations, I propose, are some of the more powerful ones guiding the qualitative/naturalistic orientation being examined in this symposium.

Multiple Realities

Inquiry should account for realities that are socially constructed through individual experiences. Thus efforts to reduce the complexities of socially constructed realities into neatly independently manipulatable parts, typically called variables, is to overly distort the world and render it less knowable. Since multiple realities result from individuals interpreting their experiences, their "points of view" must be taken into account if the social/behavioral world is to be understood. The "point of view" construct then becomes an important research construct which directs us to distort the subjects' experiences and interpretations the least (Bodan & Biklin, 1982, p. 32). The ontology holds that "social/behavioral phenomena exist chiefly in the minds of people, and there are as many realities as persons" (Guba, 1981, p. 77).

Discovering and Explaining

Inquiry that is qualitative and naturalistic is viewed as appropriate for determining what actually exists. Thus our theoretical formulations should be constructed through grounded approaches which gradually and inductively yield explanations for that under examination (Glaser 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Inquiry should not emerge from prior elaborate theoretical schemes and deductively formulated propositions. Instead, it is begun when a problematic state-of-affairs is perceived to exist, open to exploration, interpretation, and explanation. In other words, "a priori decisions as to what counts as significant cannot be made" (Smith, 1981, p. 74).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Descriptions, Explanation, and Theory as Expansionistic

Theoretical formulations, including describing, analyzing, interpreting, and explaining, should be derived from grounded, substantive, inductive methods viewed as inseparable from the processes through which they are generated. Since processes are associated with change, our formulations, which seek to explain social/behavioral phenomena must be viewed as tentative and expansionistic, seeking to incorporate increasingly "thick descriptions" so that greater transfer and comparisons with other contexts might be achieved (Guba, 1981, p. 86; Hymes, 1979; McCutcheon, 1981).

Importance of Context

Emphasis on situational/contextual elements is viewed as critical since "human behavior is rarely if ever context free." (Guba, 1981, p. 78) If human behavior is to be understood, it must be modeled in relation to the interactions of physical, natural, and socio-cultural environments. The total context is important since all that happens may have value in providing clues.

Generalizations (truth-statements) seeking to describe, interpret, or explain are, moreover, ideographic not nomothetic. They are not context-free and are considerd "true" only if they logically appear to provide the "best fit to the phenomena under study" (Guba, 1981, p. 77).

Emergent Designs

Qualitative research rests on the presupposition that one "should proceed as if they know very little about the people and places" to be studied. Fully accounting for the procedures used can best be "described in retrospect," constructed as "a narrative of what actually happened written after the study is completed" (Bogdon & Biklen, 1982, p. 55). While a qualitative study is framed theoreticaly (concern with meaning and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

process, inductive analysis, use of specific methods, and conceptualized through the intellectual scheme of the researcher), the design itself must emerge from the study as it is conducted, not from a preordinate fixed design. Initial research plans exist as hunches, subject to restructuring as studies evolve. Decisions regarding design and data analysis are made when appropriate in the conduct of the study. Designs can be viewed as "funnels," exploratory and broad initially and more focused toward the end.

Methodological Features of Qualitative Naturalistic Inquiry

Case Study Designs

A single case study involves a detailed examination of a particular event, set of documents, a setting, or perhaps a single subject. Specific types of inquiries may be observational case studies, historical development of organizations, life history, situational analyses and community studies. Comparative (multi-site) case study designs examine two or more sites for the purpose of comparisons or contrast, especially if the intent is to generate more abstract theoretical formulations.

Participant-Observer or Observer-Participant

The role of the researcher is created specifically for the setting under study. While numerous situational factors will influence the role assumed, the intent is to become an active member of a group or organization while conducting the research process.

Sampling

Sampling techniques typically employed include: time sampling - sensitivity to data collected within historical time frames; internal sampling - collection of data based on decisions about what and when to observe, who to interview, documents to examine, and what to do next;

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

theoretical/purposive sampling - selection of particular research targets since it is believed that they can contribute substantially to the knowledge desired. The purpose is to broaden the data base through use of important and relevant data sources.

Analytical Induction

This approach is typically employed when a specific problem, issue, or question is viewed as having exceptional value in providing focus for the research. Initially, a descriptive model of the phenomenon is constructed with additional data collected to modify and enlarge the theoretical formulations which seek to explain the phenomenon being studied.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a research method typically associated with "participant and nonparticipant observation, focus on natural settings, use of participant constructs to structure the research, and investigator avoidance of purposive manipulation of study variables" (Le Compte and Goetz, 1982, p. 32; McMillan & Schumacher, Chapt. 11, 1984; Smith, 1981).

Grounded Theory

The idea of grounded theory, proposed and utilized by Glaser and Strauss (1967), holds that theory should be constructed inductively through a specified method of research. Grounded theory, viewed as having decided advantages over traditional hypothetico-deductive approaches, is defined as having four properties: fitness, degree of correspondence to the realities of the phenomena studied; understanding, makes sense and is understood by the people working in the substantive area; generality, not overly specific so that it is applicable to diverse situations and the concepts have relevance for both the researcher and the practitioner (abstractness as well as sensitizing features); control, results from

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

generality which permits meaningful predictions.

Negative Case Analysis

The technique involves the revision of interpretations and explanation when an exception to previous cases is noted. Associated with "accepting no tolerance from the rule," it is a rigorous method since it is not possible to average data obtained from groups of individuals (Williamson, Karp, Dalphin & Gray 1982, p. 195).

Constant Comparative Method

This technique, proposed and utilized by Glasser and Strauss (1967), necessitates that categories be constructed from initial data collection. Later the categories are refined and more fully developed, incorporating more incidents or specifics, producing a model which seeks to fully describe and explain the phenomenon under study.

Researcher as the Main Instrument of Data Collection

Naturalistic/qualitative researchers use themselves as data collection and data processing instruments, relying upon their own subjectivity and tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958) as means through which understandings can be achieved. Concern is not with instruments of data collection which prevent the researcher from having direct contact with that under analysis. The researcher becomes the perceptual lens through which observations are made and interpreted (McCutcheon, 1981).

Triangulation

This procedure involves the "combination of two or more different research strategies in the study of the same empirical units" (Denzin, 1978, p. 308). The strategies include cross-checking of data and their interpretations, use of a variety of data sources, framing explanations through different theoretical perspectives, using different investigators, and employing various data collection strategies.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Maps/Models

These are simplified, contrived pictures that permit us to grasp more readily the complexities of structures, activities, processes, and interactions of the social/behavioral world. Some typical mapping approaches used focus on social, spatial and temporal relationships with models resulting which may be primarily descriptive, or more analytical and theoretical.

Foreshadowed Problems

These are broad questions (what, why, how) about the phenomenon to be studied that guide inquiry during the early stages. Initial questions emerge through one's existing conceptual/theoretical framework and may be altered considerably, or even discarded, as the study proceeds. Initially, the focus is on settings and situations, not concepts and theories (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984).

Levels of Abstraction

As proposed by McMillan and Schumacher (1984), formulations produced through qualitative methods may be viewed as representing three different levels of abstraction. Descriptive narratives are similar to investigative reporting in which events, behavior and activities over time are described. Explanations offered are normally those provided by the subjects. Analytical interpretations move beyond description and incorporate analyses and interpretations offered by the researcher. Understanding the event becomes the focus when analytical interpretations are offered. Theory formulations, usually of the minature or middle-range type, involve developing concepts and the framing of propositions into a coherent system of ideas so that relationship between concepts can be derived.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Trustworthiness of Naturalistic/Qualitative Research

Various persons have sought to show that naturalistic inquiry can be associated with guiding concepts which are appropriate for judging the "trustworthiness" of the research methods used and finding generated (Roadan & Taylor, 1975; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1984). While the standards remain somewhat primitive, and may not be shared by all in the research community, they appear to have value in assessing naturalistic inquiry. Four constructs proposed by Guba (1981) are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility (internal validity, truth value)

Naturalistic inquirers are concerned with establishing the credibility of their findings with the data sources on which the claims are based. In the case of studying individuals and groups, the data are tested with the members of the individuals/groups studied. Isomorphism is of critical importance, i.e., findings should be isomorphic to respondent's perceptions (multiple realities). (This is typically not possible with quantitative research.)

Transferability (external validity-applicability-generalizability)

Through the use of "thick descriptions" one seeks to determine the extent to which working hypotheses can be transferred from one context to another. The extent to which this can be done depends on the similarity of the two contexts (fittingness).

Dependability (consistency; reliability)

This idea is that instrument changes are not explained by error, though it can be present (fatigue, oversight) but perhaps of increased awareness, sensitivity, or understanding of the phenomenon. Consistency implies "trackable variance" related to changes in the data sources,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

increased proficiency of the instrument (improved insights) and reality changes in the subjects.

Confirmability (neutrality; objectivity)

Confirmability to the naturalistic inquirer is related to the effort to place the "burden of neutrality" on the data, not the investigator or instrument. Instead of desiring traditional objectivity (intersubjective agreement), evidence is sought to demonstrate that the data are confirmable. While investigator predilections might distort the data, efforts to achieve confirmability include clarifying one's presuppositions which led to the framing of certain questions, practicing reflexivity through systematic recording of interpretations, insights, hunches, and collaboration (briefing) with peers on the interpretations offered.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

References

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). Qualitative rsesearch for education: An introduction to theory and methods. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bogdan, R. C., & Taylor, S. J. (1975). Introduction to qualitative research methods. New York: John Wiley.

Denzin, N. K. (1978). The logic of naturalistic inquiry. In N. K. Denzin (Ed.). Sociological methods: A sourcebook. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Dobbert, M. L. (1982). Ethnographic research: Theory and application for modern schools and society. New York: Praeger.

Eisner, E. W. (1979). The educational imagination. New York: Macmillan.

Eisner, E. W.(1983, May). Anastasia might still be alive, but the monarchy is dead. Educational Researcher. 12(5), 13-14,23-24.

Filstead, W. J. (1970). Qualitative methodology. Firsthand involvement with the social world. Chicago: Markham Publishing Co.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.

Glaser, B. G. (1978). Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Guba, E. G. (1978). Toward a methodology of naturalistic inquiry in educational evaluation. CSE monograph series in evaluation. No. 8, Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Evaluation. UCLA.

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of naturalistic inquiries. Educational Communication and Technology, 29(2),79-91.

Hymes, D. H. (1979). Ethnographic monitoring. In E. J. Briere (Ed.). Language development in a bilingual society. Pomona, CA: California State Polytechnic University. National Dissemination and Assessment Center.

LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982, Spring). Problem of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. Review of Educational Research, 52(1), 31-60.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1982, October). Establishing dependability and confirmability in naturalistic inquiry through an audit. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, New York, NY.

McCutcheon, G. (1981, May). On the interpretation of classroom observations. Educational Researcher. 12(5),5-10.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (1984). Research in education. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984, May). Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: Toward a shared craft. Educational Researcher, 13(5),20-30.

Patton, M. Q. (1980). Qualitative evaluation methods. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Phillips, D. C. (1983 March). After the wake: Post positivistic educational thought. Educational Researcher, 12(5),4-12.

Polanyi, M. (1958). Personal knowledge. New York: Harper & Row.

Richardt, C. P., & Cook, T. D. (Eds.). (1979). Qualitative and quantitative methods in evaluation research. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Smith, D. M. (1981). Ethnographic monitoring: A way of understanding by those who are making schooling work. The Generator. 12(2), 69-92.

Smith, P. L. (1980, Fall). On the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. CEDR Quarterly. 13(3), 3-6.

Spradley, James. (1980). Participant observation. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Thomas, R. M. (1984, January). Mapping meta-territory. Educational Researcher. 13(1), 16-18.

Tuthill, D., & Ashton, P. (1983, December). Improving educational research through the development of educational paradigms. Educational Researcher. 12(10), 6-14.

Williamson, J. B., Karp, D. A., Dalphin, J. R., & Gray, P. S. (1982) The research craft. (2nd ed.). Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Wilson, S. (1977, Winter). The use of ethnographic techniques in educational research. Review of Educational Research, 47(1), 245-265.

Wolf, R. L., & Tymitz, B. (1977). Toward more natural inquiry in education. CEDR Quarterly, 10, 7-9.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE